

28hh- Sense Of Shame And Fear Of Wrongdoing

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(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Q: Authenticity, self-honesty, sense of shame and a fear of wrongdoing, these are all prerequisites for developing freedom from suffering, but what about guilt?

Nyanamoli: Those necessary qualities prevent you from doing unwholesome things based on greed, aversion and delusion. If you don't have those qualities preventing you from bad behaviour, then there are only circumstances around you preventing you, and if circumstances around you are in favour of shamelessness, then you certainly won't be keeping your behaviour in check. That's why it's good to have a sense of shame, even if you don't necessarily have wisdom or restraint in place, at least that sense of shame will keep you from becoming like an animal in terms of your behaviour. That's why it's called "a guardian of the world". As the Buddha said, if there were no sense of shame, sons would be sleeping with mothers and sisters, and fathers with daughters, it would be as wild as the animal realm.

"Monks, these two bright qualities guard the world. Which two? Sense of shame and fear of wrongdoing. If these two bright qualities did not guard the world, there would be no recognition of 'mother' here, no recognition of 'mother's sister,' 'uncle's wife,' 'teacher's wife,' or 'wife of those who deserve respect.' The world would be immersed in promiscuity, like rams with goats, roosters with pigs, or dogs with jackals. But because these two bright qualities guard the world, there is recognition of 'mother,' 'mother's sister,' 'uncle's wife,' 'teacher's wife,' & 'wife of those who deserve respect.'" - [AN 2.9](#)

Q: Human beings have an inherent sense of shame. You can sense when you're doing something wrong.

Nm: There is a natural sense of shame, in regard to nudity, body exposure, lewd course words, stealing, lying, and so on. If there wasn't that natural shame, we would be getting up to all sorts of bad behaviour, leading to mental decline and complete chaos. When you're honest and authentic, that sense of shame is what gets revealed. It's not about becoming morally judgmental. That just comes out of ill will and repression. No, if you're authentic, then you realise that there are things that you don't necessarily want to do with others or to be known publicly, which means then, because you're authentic, you wouldn't be doing it. And if you have guilt on account of past behaviours, instead of denying it, ignoring it, you accept the guilt as a result of what you've done carelessly and then next time, it will make you think twice, because you're not running away from the disagreeable feeling of guilt, you're accepting it. And sometimes it can endure for days, and then come back again and again, maybe even for years later, but each time it comes you must accept it.

It's good to be guilt free. And the only way to be guilt free is through fully accepting guilt and then going beyond it. Not by ignoring it or denying it. And that is exactly the case, people feel that inherent sense of shame but they blame society for it. I mean, yes, society has a lot of play in the degree of shaming, but there is that threshold, which is the natural shame. And some people have more of it, some people have less of it.

But then people find that natural shame to be a problem because it can be unpleasant if it's preventing them from doing what they want to do. And then yes, they tend to blame society, or blame the culture, they rebel against it, they try to override it. But that's a completely misplaced effort. The better effort is to accept that there is a place for the natural degree of shame in regard to doing things that are inappropriate, not because someone says so but because you recognise that certain actions lead to your own harm, to the harm of others and do not lead you to wisdom or contentment, and that if there was no sense of shame, you would easily be acting in ways that would not be in your best interest.

For example, you can see the dogs that go into a village because they caught the scent of a female on heat. They sense that they're most likely going to be attacked and maybe seriously injured by all the other pack dogs. But they're just focussed on that female and lose what little perspective they had. Their senses just pull them into that direction where they get attacked and suffer many unfortunate consequences. They can't factor the consequences in because the mind doesn't possess the same powers of reflection as the human mind. That's why they don't have a natural sense of shame. But for most people, they do have that recognition which will be guarding them from going in directions which are extremely unwholesome and lead to further suffering.

Q How do you develop that sense of shame?

Nm: By becoming more self transparent, by keeping your desires in check. Then you will realise that with or without the sense of shame, you are the one responsible for saying yes to desires and following them, because it doesn't matter what thoughts your mind might be presenting you, in forms of the desire, possibilities for things you want to do, that doesn't matter. What matters is whether you accept it, following through with it or not. So with self-honesty, you don't blame society, the government, you don't blame your genes, "Oh, that's how I was born". Even if all those things are in play, you are always responsible for the consequences of your choices. For example, a person trying to give up an addiction, can reflect on the consequences of their actions, but when that desire is present they don't see consequences relevant on the same level, as where the addiction is, but if you are self honest, you will be able to allow whatever pressing desire arises and have enough space to not give in to it, to not be hooked by it. However, you have to start seeing benefits even in that initial restraint. If you don't, then it won't work. There won't be enough ground for any proper development, because without that basic restraint beforehand, you won't be able to allow desire to come close without you acting upon it. As soon as it arises, you'll be acting upon it. The restraining prevents it, it doesn't mean it's gonna make things easier, but it will be more peaceful later on. The mind grows from it and until then, it's gonna reveal the underlying pain beneath the desire and lack of restraint.
